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Student opinion of junior college English programs is reflected in this analysis of a questionnaire completed by students who had been enrolled in freshman English classes at nine junior colleges. Comparisons are drawn between dropout and sophomore responses, and between humanities-social science-service (HSS) and science-math-technology (SMT) sophomores. Dropout-sophomore information includes (1) reasons for dropping out, (2) success in high school and college freshman English, (3) parental educational background, (4) reading habits, and (5) opinions on the effectiveness of the English teacher and English course. Information on the two sophomore interest groups includes (1) freshman English grades, (2) evaluation of the study of composition and literature, (3) reading habits, (4) evaluation of English teacher and course effectiveness, and (5) student recommendations for a better course. For a related document see TE 500 590. (AF)

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An Analysis of a Follow-Up Questionnaire Administered to 743 Students Who Had Been Enrolled in Freshman English at Nine Junior Colleges

by Patricia Gaj

In an attempt to determine student opinion of junior college English programs, 10 representative junior colleges across the country were asked to conduct on their campus a brief sampling of student opinion. Each school was to administer a questionnaire to 3 different groups consisting of 1. 50 sophomores who had completed freshman English and were committed to a transfer program: 25 in an advanced class in science or math and 25 in an advanced class in history, psychology, or the social sciences; 2. 50 sophomores who were committed to a terminal vocational training program: 25 in technical-mechanical programs (electronics, data processing, etc.) and 25 in service-type programs (nursing, dental technician, etc.); 3. 50 students who dropped out without finishing a full year of credit.

Completed questionnaires were received from 9 schools with a total number of 685 filled out by enrolled students and 58 by dropouts. Unfortunately, some schools did not indicate in what classes the forms were administered. As a result, the original plan of dividing students into transfer and terminal proved unworkable and it was decided to separate the enrolled students into 2 groups based on their stated primary interest. One group (241 students) consisted of humanities-social science-service students and the other (315) was made up of science-math-technology students. This left 129 questionnaires with no indication of interest; these 129 were included in the comparison of dropouts with all enrolled students but were omitted in the comparison of the two above-mentioned groups.

Among the dropouts 61% (32/52)[1] of those who answered the question attended classes for a semester or more, thus suggesting that the majority

TE 500 591

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[1]Since the number of students who answered a question varied, the denominator changes from item to item. The numerator indicates the number of students to which the statement applies.

of these students made an extended attempt to stay in school. This conclusion is supported by the reasons given by the students themselves for leaving. Seven cited a need to work, four mentioned illness, and several others gave reasons harder to classify. Some of the explanatory comments show that these so-called dropouts really feel that junior college was a positive experience and may return to school: "I was confused about my future. I was unsure of myself and I dropped out. Now I am back in [another] school and I am enjoying it. I plan on going to summer school."

Significantly, of the 25 explanations given to the question of why the student left, 22 dropped for reasons not related to the English course. Only 2 checked the comment: "It [English course] did not seem to have any relationship to my life today and to my future." Obviously, then, few dropouts gave up easily or lacked the desire to learn. It is not necessary to assume that all our dropouts are more responsive than the total class of dropouts, since the majority of our group were specifically asked to fill out our questionnaires by counselors at the time of leaving school, and so represent a cross-section of dropouts.

In fact, the so-called dropouts were rather successful. 65% (34/52) of those who took an English course completed it. This is a high percentage indicating academic success, an idea supported by the fact that most of the dropouts cited nonacademic reasons for leaving school. Therefore the remaining 35% cannot be assumed to have had trouble with courses without further proof. The burden of proof is with the skeptics of success since the dropouts rated their overall grades in high school English as: 9% (5/55) "excellent," 45%(25/55) "good," 42% (23/55) "fair," and only 4% (2/55) "poor" with three people not answering the question. There is little reason to believe that our dropouts were atypical as regards high school records, especially since these figures are almost the same as those for the students who had persisted into their sophomore year. The ratings

given by sophomores for their college composition grades were: 15% (87/579) "excellent," 48% (278/579) "good," 37% (212/579) "fair," and 4% (25/579) "poor." The total adds up here and in some of the following tabulations to more than a 100% because several people checked more than one answer; here there were 23 double responses and 1 in between "good" and "fair," probably as a result of different grades in more than one course. The evidence so far supports the conclusion that dropouts often are caused by circumstances beyond the student's control. They may be due simply to the development of new factors in the student's life (marriage, draft, new job, etc.) that cause him to leave the junior college, not rejecting it but placing something else above it. He may often return in the future, as seen by the number of people in the enrolled student sample who attended some other school first.

In many ways the dropouts were similar to those students who continued. One characteristic they shared was parental educational background. Both parents attended college, some with a degree, in 18% (9/51) of the cases among the dropouts and 18% (122/673) of the cases among the sophomores. In addition 48% (24/50) of the dropouts and 44% (290/658) of the others had at least one parent who attended college. The only noticeable difference results from the fact that 24% (12/50) of the dropouts come from families without a high school diploma by either parent whereas only 15% (97/658) of the still enrolled students have parents with this educational background. These figures suggest that a low parental educational background may lead a student to place less importance on a college education. It is interesting to notice, although of course it proves nothing, that the only 2 students who felt that English had no relationship to life came from a home where neither parent graduated from high school.

We derive other knowledge of effect of education of parents by comparing the background of students with specific grades. Among the sophomores who rated their grades as "excellent" 22% (19/87) had parents who both attended college and 43% (37/87) had at least one parent who continued beyond high school. These percentages are close to those for all students. However, the figures change more significantly from the average when students who rated their grades as "poor" are considered. Among these, only 12% (3/25) had parents who both attended college and only 28% (7/25) had at least one parent who continued beyond high school. The implications are that having college-educated parents does not help a student to achieve "excellent" grades, but that having non-college parents decreases a student's ability (perhaps for financial reasons) and/or his desire to achieve good grades.

Little difference between dropouts and students appeared when they were asked to estimate how many books they had read in the last three months and to give the titles of three. Among the dropouts 41% (24/58) said "0" or left the answer blank as did 45% (310/685) of the sophomores. 19% (11/58) of the dropouts were able to list three books by title and/or author as were 23% (157/685) of the enrolled students. However, the reading habits of students who rated their grades as "excellent" are somewhat different. Although 41% (36/87) answered "0" or left the item blank, 45% (39/87) could name at least three by title and/or author. The group that does not read -- many citing "no time" during school year -- amounts to the same percentage among dropouts, continuing students, and the select group of good students. But a much greater percentage of the good students read a lot, perhaps because they are more academically oriented.

Another question asked if the student felt that his English teacher had learned his strengths and interests in English. The dropouts answered

"yes" in 49% (24/49) of the cases and "no" in 51% (25/49). Note that half of the dropouts did consider their English teacher was personally interested in them. Yet the sophomores were somewhat more enthusiastic with "yes" accounting for 58% (388/673) of the responses and "no" for 44% (293/673).

The concluding item asked the student to rate the effect on his life and thinking resulting from his experience with college English. The dropouts felt that it was "indifferent": 48% (21/44) with 45% (20/44) "positive" and only 7% (3/44) "negative," The majority of enrolled students rated it "positive": 55% (359/649) with 41% (263/649) "indifferent" and only 5% (34/649) "negative." The hopeful note here is the very small percentages that answered negatively.

The difference in the above two items between dropouts and enrolled students may be due to an imagined or actual lack of teacher interest that could have contributed to the making of a dropout. Or the negative view of some dropouts may be a rationalization as they look back over their need to or desire to leave school.

Yet this study has shown that the dropout is very similar to his scholastic counterpart in grades, parental education, and reading habits. Often his decision to leave is triggered by external circumstances and he rarely looks back on his experiences in junior college English as having a negative effect on his life. A woman who left college because of her husband's illness and distance from the school writes: "I hope that the college continues to expand because I believe it to be the only type of school that gives all persons a chance to learn if they want it."

The sophomores were also divided as stated above into one group (241) interested in humanities-social science-service, hereafter abbreviated HSS,

and another group (315) interested in science-mathematics-technology, abbreviated SMT. Between these two groups there were several differences. 78% (174/223) of the HSS group rated their grades in college English as "excellent" or "good" compared with only 58% (153/266) of the SMT group. The fact that neither group had many "poor" -- HSS 1% (3/223) and SMT 5% (13/266) -- suggests that both groups are capable, but that the SMT has less interest in English courses. The job before the English teacher is therefore to give these students a better appreciation of the value of English as part of his life.

This lesser interest was also suggested when the students were asked to evaluate the study of composition in college. 47% (113/241) of the HSS group considered it "important, interesting" compared to 32% (100/309) of the SMT group. Only 19% (46/241) of the HSS group considered it "important, difficult" but 28% (86/309) of the SMT group rated it this way. The majority from both groups believed composition to be important but the SMT people emphasized the difficulty of the course. This may very well be due to a lack of interest rather than a lack of ability. Suggestions for change made repeatedly by SMT students were that the English course be related to the individual's field of study and that the student be allowed to choose his own topics. One sophomore wrote:

> Freshman english [sic] nearly killed my interest in writing. I was forced so often to write about such trivial matters that it became a chore. However, a new course in technical writing has allowed me to write about what I want. It has increased my interest so much that now I occasionaly [sic] write technical articles outside of class, for a club magazine.

Despite remarks like this, relatively few from either group thought the study of composition was "unimportant": HSS 4% (9/241) and SMT 10% (33/309).

An even greater difference in attitude is seen in the values placed on studying literature in college. 71% (171/240) of the HSS students, but only

42% (127/299) of the SMT group, considered literature as "important, interesting." And, where only 12% (19/240) of the HSS group rated literature study as "unimportant," 32% (95/299) of the SMT group chose this answer. Compare this last figure with the 10% that considered composition unimportant. The greater value given to composition by the SMT students is probably due to its obvious practical application since literature is often criticized by these students for a lack of practicality: " [The effect of the course is] mostly positive but knowing so much Shakespere [sic] I feel will only help me on a quiz game on TV." "I totally enjoy sciences and math -- the things that make our world alive. A story is nice, but honestly is no more good than to relax by."

One way to combat this attitude and make the course "more relevant" is suggested by the students. Many want to read modern literature and write on current topics, and praise this approach when it is followed. "I would try to make it more relevant to current subjects, therefore, it would be more interesting." "[I liked] A chance to relate today's problems with problems similar to people long ago."

Besides attitude, another difference between the HSS group and the SMT group was in reading habits. More of the HSS students than the average of all students and more than the SMT group could name the title and/or author of three recently read books: 33% (80/241) and fewer said "0" or left the answer blank: 36% (87/241). This compares to the 18% (57/315) of the SMT students who could identify three books and the 46% (146/315) who named none. Again there seemed to be a lack of interest on the part of SMT students.

Asked whether English teachers got to know the individual's interests and strengths in English, those in HSS answered "yes" in 62% (148/239) of the cases and "no" in 40% (96/239). Those in SMT said "yes" in 56% (172/308)

of the responses and "no" in 45% (139/308).

Similarly, the effect on their lives and thinking was rated "positive" by 65% (154/238) of the HSS group and only 50% (152/302) of the SMT group. The difference in percentage was made up by the large number of "indifferent" responses given by the SMT students: 45% (136/302) as compared to only 34% (81/238) of the HSS group. Neither group, however, expressed many "negative" views: HSS 3% (8/238) and SMT 5% (14/302). This last seems to show that the SMT student is not antagonistic to English but simply must be inspired to enjoy it.

Perhaps a change of attitude would be fostered by adopting the suggestions expressed in the questionnaire. Many students want to spend more time on creative writing. And a great many feel that too many restrictions in form and grammar were placed on them:

> "Let the student develop his style rather than stomp him for spelling and punctuation."
>
> "I would stress expression and thought rather than exact precise form: general form and rules are necessary but to cut a grade point for one comma out of order is ridiculous."

Hopefully an improved program would lead to even more comments like these:

> "My work and assignments were designed to help me to learn English and I was not expected to do excellent until I learned the techniques. Excellent program."
>
> "I do not believe I began to think in an orderly fashion til I was taught to write in an orderly fashion."

In summary, the HSS include more students with good grades in English -- a fact which is not surprising since we usually do well in the things we like and often grow to like the things we do well in. More of the HSS students

than those in SMT consider composition interesting, although the same percentage of each group rate it as important. Within the SMT group alone, however, over three times as many students think literature is unimportant compared to those who consider composition unimportant. On the whole, the SMT group is more indifferent to English, reading less and seeing less often a positive effect on their lives through English courses. Yet their attitude is far from negative, and therefore there is hope of involving them more in English -- perhaps by adopting their own suggestions: relating the course to the individual's field of study, reading modern literature, writing about current topics, doing more creative writing, letting the student choose his topics, and having fewer restrictions in form and grammar.